but we do have to talk about it--for the safety of this vessel."

Spock didn't move, didn't speak.

"I'm sorry, Spock. You know it won't go any further."

"Unless it becomes necessary--for the safety of this vessel." The black inferno of Vulcan passion gaped suddenly between them, a moat forbidding trespass. The slur stung because it was true. The safety of the ship came first. Kirk felt the flare of his own anger, almost a physical sensation in his body.

"That's correct, Mr. Spock. I am prepared to do anything necessary to secure this ship."

"As I am." Spock's eyes were blazing now, hard and glittering. His half healed hands clenched into fists at his side. "As I have. From that fact you may infer that the matter does not concern the ship's safety. It is, in fact, impossible that it do so." Spock turned on his heel.

"I haven't dismissed you!" He heard the command snap in his voice, felt the anger out of control, knew it for what it was--counterirritant for pain--and still couldn't stop it. He was flushed and shaking with rage. "I'll be the judge of what affects this ship, and if you don't obey my order to report, you can explain why to a general court!"

That threat stopped the Vulcan as effectively as a phaser on stun. He stood facing the door, frozen in midstride. There was a silence in the room as brittle as glass.

God, Spock, I didn't mean it--I'd never--but Kirk didn't withdraw the words, and it was Spock who yielded. His hands, still scarred and healing, clasped each other behind his back. Slowly he turned around, and his fire cooled to ice. Controlled, formal, untouchable.

"My attacker's name was S'Tyge. He was the Romulan officer in charge of obtaining the Ixmahx artifact. He knew the nature of the device and wanted to destroy it prior to the return of the Enterprise. He was also of the Hreth Malock clan, a cousin to the commander of the ship from which we stole the cloaking device. My presence in the landing party enabled him to accomplish two purposes at once--interrogation and revenge. He died in the struggle with the Wielda and his body was utterly destroyed in the antimatter explosion. Therefore it is impossible that his attack on me is related in any way at all to the death of a crewmember here. That is the end of my report."

Kirk leaned wearily on the desk. So that was it--and Spock was right, there was no connection. He had destroyed something priceless for no gain at all.

"I'm sorry, Spock--" he swept the data cube into the oubliette, flicked the switch that would reduce it to nuclear particles--"It's forgotten."

"No," said the Vulcan precisely. "It is not." Then he did leave.

Kirk relayed the information to McCoy and ignored his recommendation to try sleeping for a change. Instead he sought refuge in a solitary, maudelin drunk. He told himself that he didn't deserve this load of guilt, that it wasn't his fault there were Romulans on Ixmahx, that T'serek had returned with a confirmed case of hero worship for Spock or that Nadia's comforting stability seemed shaken to the core. But the facts remained. He had sent them to Ixmahx. Long ago he had pressured Spock into charming and betraying the Romulan commander. He had engineered the sordid scene with Spock--blackmailing his best friend. But what was he supposed to do? Play favorites? Spock had never before asked special consideration--why should Kirk feel so guilty for failing to grant it now?

He drank until his head pounded, his stomach heaved, and he was ingloriously sick in the commode but he couldn't retch up the bitter bile of betrayal. And the worst of it was that he knew how to get them back. The manipulator always knows. He surveyed his face in the mirror--gray, sweating. All he had to do was risk his neck doing something gloriously heroic. Spock would be there to rescue him, Dray to admire, and Nadia to comfort the wounded warrior. He could have all three if he wanted, because right or wrong, James Kirk always managed to get what he wanted. But what would they get? he asked his drunken image in the mirror. Well, he could take his impotence and drinking to Nadia's bed, his jaded drives and desire to dominate to Dray's, and if Spock didn't like it--he brushed the lank strands of hair out of his eyes--well, he could just send Spock off on a mission somewhere to face death or a fate worse than. He stared into his mirrored eyes and dared them to deny it. Wasn't he a wonder?

If his hangover hadn't sobered him, the second death would have. It had occurred in early hours of the morning, and it was a male this time, a security guard who had taken an ill advised tour through the shuttlebay. Once again, McCoy's team took the body away in a bag. Kirk closed every security door in the ship and they went over it with tricorders. Nothing. He needed Spock's assistance to revamp duty assignments, but sweated through it by himself, trying to make sure that no crewman stood solitary duty. In the cases where it couldn't be helped, due to the nature of the job or the size of the space in which it was performed, he saw that there was a guard nearby. In totally arbitrary fashion, he ordered everyone in the crew to share sleeping quarters with at least one other person that night. No one seemed unwilling to comply, and as he prowled the halls, keeping the security men on their toes and taking a fair chance that one of them would shoot him if he surprised them, he heard several slumber parties in progress. He was overtired, running on adrenalin, but he couldn't seem to turn it off. He had the conviction there was some one small detail he had overlooked, and he missed Spock's usual efficient presence with a constant ache which was not eased by finding that Dray had wangled himself a duty station near Spock's quarters. The Guthrie was pale and serious, and Kirk didn't envy anything that challenged his right to guard the first officer's meditations. McCoy was sleeping peacefully on a diagnostic table, but he was in full view of three medics, so Kirk left him alone. Scotty, after a full day's work scouring the blueprints for any kind of unexamined hiding place, was now monitoring a continuous interior scan of the ship by computers. It seemed impossible that anything could happen in the face of that much security, but his heart jarred in his side when his communicator beeped.

"Scott, here, Captain. Would Mr. Spock have been included in your order to tuck up tight, sir?"

Kirk hadn't thought about it, certainly didn't expect the Vulcan to share his quarters, but he should have at least been in them. "Why, Scotty?"